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# FROM THE OPIUM OF THE MASSES TO ACID COMMUNISM: ON THE DIALECTICS OF CRITIQUE AND INTOXICATION

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Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by deathlike sleep, is one of the oldest social transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself. The fear of losing the self, and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life, the aversion to death and destruction, is twinned with a promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment.

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, 26)

## Introduction

There is a powerful and dominant tradition in western thought, reaching its peak in the age of enlightenment, that considers critique and intoxication as opposing forces.<sup>1</sup> Whoever is critical, is rational and 'sober', and whenever one is intoxicated, be it by love or other drugs, critical capacities tend to give way. On the other hand, Pliny the Elder already noted that there is 'wisdom in wine', and he is just one amongst an alternative, perhaps less powerful but equally persistent, strand of thought arguing that there is in fact a deeper, more profound enlightenment to be found in a state of intoxication. In this article I want to further investigate this tension between the concepts of critique and intoxication. Taking the German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin as my principle guide, I want to analyze the dialectics of critique and intoxication, and explore the possibilities of a critical intoxication, and/or an intoxicated critique. What would be the aesthetic and socio-political implications for such juxtaposition for both of these categories?

To do this, I will start by 1) analyzing the tension between (the concepts of) critique and intoxication in further detail, next I will 2) discuss Benjamin's concept of 'profane illumination' and his dialectical approach to this tension. I will continue 3) by focusing on the political implications of this concept on the basis of Jeremy Gilbert, and next 4) explore the possibility of a 'critical mass' by discussing Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, specifically looking at the latter's concept of 'common sense'. I will conclude 5) with some reflections on the notion of Acid Communism by the late cultural critic Mark Fisher, which I consider as a promising attempt to bring critique, intoxication, and revolutionary politics in line with each other.

### 1. Tension between critique and intoxication

So, what exactly is the tension I am talking about? We can go as far as Homer's *Odyssey* to find the *urtext* of this mode of thought. Odysseus, who as Horkheimer and Adorno already argued in many ways epitomizes critical and rational thinking, has to challenge and fight intoxicating forces several times on his journey home. The first time is on the island of the Lotus-eaters, who eat nothing but the intoxicating flowers of the Lotus-plant, and as a result are in a continuous state of blissful lethargy. When some men of Odysseus' crew eat from the Lotus, they forget about their mission and have to be dragged back to the ship by force:

They [...] went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches. (Homer 1999, book IX)

Another famous scene is when Odysseus' crew turns into pigs on the island of the sorceress Circe. Although here too, it concerns a specific toxic, namely poisoned wine, this scene obviously symbolizes first and foremost the intoxication caused by sexual arousal, with the traditional gender-stereotype of the irrational woman seducing the rational and goal-oriented man, and turning him into a mindless animal. Finally, and perhaps most famous, is the episode with the Sirens, wherein Odysseus lets himself be tied to the mast in order to listen to their otherwise destructive song. Although the Sirens too are female, the true seduction here is of course the song itself, in other words the idea of the intoxication of art, which is considered dangerous for man's critical capacities. Time and again, Odysseus fights intoxicating forces using his critical mind, sometimes even using these forces to his own benefit (such as the scene in which he liquors up the Cyclops).

Of this critical attitude towards intoxication we can find numerous examples in the history of western thought, from Plato's rejection of irrational art and the aesthetic experience as a form of madness in both *Ion* and the *Republic*, to Karl Marx's characterization of religion as 'opium of the masses'. Even those sympathetic to intoxication, like the French poet Charles Baudelaire in his

*Artificial Paradises*, writes that hashish “like all solitary pleasures, renders the individual useless to his fellow man, and society superfluous to the individual” (Baudelaire 1998, 74).

The final example of Odysseus is also telling because it shows us why intoxication would be harmful to critical thinking: it lacks the very distance required of critique. Indeed, whoever is critical puts himself at a distance. The very word *critique* comes from the Greek *krino* (κρίνω), to separate, divide and distinguish, or to judge and decide. For Kant, critical judgment was precisely that, to separate, and hence put a distance between right and wrong, sense and nonsense, between beauty and ugliness, or between what can be known and what cannot be known. In the German *ur-teilen* (judging, deciding) there still resounds the separation of things, putting them apart (*teilen*). Odysseus also puts things apart: he places himself at safe distance from the threat of the Sirens, thus restraining himself and withholding himself from the object of his desire. After all, Odysseus survives because he is tied to the mast, and because the ears of his oarsmen are filled with wax so that they cannot hear his desperate pleas to untie him, or turn the ship towards the island. His survival, in other words, is possible because of his ‘cunning’ (the way Homer characterizes Odysseus throughout the *Odyssey*). His critical, rational self outsmarts his intoxicated self.

This image of Odysseus as the critical subject who is, however, also tied to the mast can also explain why, the other way around, there is a tradition of thinking that values intoxication precisely at the expense of critique. The distance that characterizes critique is then rejected, and opposed to the immersion, nearness, participation and affirmation that characterizes the intoxicated state. We can recognize this in Nietzsche’s attempts to overcome the tradition of western thought, starting with Plato and dominant until Kant. The latter, Kant, the critical thinker *par excellence*, he called in a rant in the *Antichrist*, “a nihilist, with his bowels of Christian dogmatism” because he “regarded pleasure as an *objection*”. “This is the very recipe for decadence”, Nietzsche continues, “and no less for idiocy... Kant became an idiot” (Nietzsche 2006, aphorism 11). Philosophers up until Kant had divided the world into the sensuous and ephemeral world and an eternal, transcendent world that is more real, more true. This, after all, allowed the critical mind *not* to participate, *not* to be involved in the world, in the flesh, in the Dionysian ecstasy, to become member of a priestly caste that only judges, and thereby, in Nietzsche’s view, becomes the ultimate enemy of life itself. The priestly caste, as he explains in *Genealogy of Morals*, praises what is weak and suffering, while deeming happiness, joy and strength sinful. In Nietzsche’s view, this is the ultimate form of decadence, against which he mobilizes an entire counter-tradition that opposes critique with vitality and life-affirmation. According to him, we should play and dance, we should consider reality and our existence as something exciting and joyful. In other words: we should be drunk with life itself.

There is a clear resonance of this counter-critical tradition in contemporary philosophical and artistic critiques of critique, such as the one by Alain Badiou, although surely not a vitalist, who rejected the critical Kantian tradition in favor of affirmation and being ‘true to the Event’ (Badiou 1999); or by Bruno Latour who in a seminal article argued that ‘critique has run out of steam’ (Latour 2004); or in Derrida’s deconstruction, which, as Bernard Stiegler notes, “claims that the nucleus of criticism shatters because it equates critical possibility with absolute autonomy, thereby excluding the possibility of a relational criticism” (Stiegler 2013, 44). We recognize it, finally, in

certain artistic practices such as community and participatory art, which as Claire Bishop has argued are often based on a negative view of 'spectatorship', of the one who merely watches or comments but remains uninvolved (Bishop 2012). Although there are of course great differences between these thinkers and arguments, what connects them is the rejection of the 'outsider' perspective and detached attitude of the critic, which is contrasted to an immersive, involved and engaged attitude.

To summarize: from the perspective of critique, intoxication is dangerous, maddening, irrational, and barbaric; from the perspective of intoxication, critique is detached, uninvolved, impotent, and life-negating. Now obviously, this is not simply a question of either/or, and indeed throughout western history intoxication has accompanied critical rationality as its bad consciousness, or as, in Horkheimer and Adorno's words quoted in the epitaph, "an attempt by the self to survive itself" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26). It is precisely this interplay of critique and intoxication that we will explore in the following sections.

## 2. Profane Illumination

Perhaps the interplay of critique and intoxication reached its culmination, or its most explicit expression, in the nineteenth-century, at least in the popular imagination: each Dr. Jekyll must have its Mr. Hyde, the cunning mind of Sherlock Holmes is also addicted to cocaine, and Baudelaire, who warned for artificial paradises, also advised us to "always be drunk".

Be drunk always. Nothing else matters; there are no other subjects. Not to feel the grim weight of Time breaking your backs and bending you double, you must get drunk and stay drunk. But drunk on what? Wine, poetry, virtue – the choice is yours. Just be drunk. (Baudelaire 2010, 73)

This brings us to the next question: are intoxication and critique just two souls in the chest of western thought, or is it possible to somehow reconcile the two, bring them together? For a possible answer I will turn to the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, who indeed clearly possessed these two souls: on the one hand he had the ambition to become the 'foremost critic' of Germany (Benjamin 1994, 359), and on the other hand he was also very interested in the phenomenon of intoxication. In a series of experiments, he used hashish and documented his thoughts and utterances, or let them be documented by others, the so-called *Hashish Protocols*. The results of these intoxicated experiments themselves were, moreover, ambiguous, in Benjamin's view. On the one hand, we can read him feeling fully at one with his body, even moving to music (which to a German bourgeois intellectual from an upper-middleclass milieu came as quite a shock). He writes about the "loosening of the I", and the unique time-space experience that makes "for anyone who has taken hashish, Versailles [...] not too large, nor eternity too long" (Benjamin 1999a, 390). On the other hand, he also writes about "the unpleasant feeling of wanting simultaneously to be alone and to be with others":

You have the feeling of needing to be alone, so as to give yourself over in deeper peace of mind to this ambiguous wink from Nirvana; and at the same time, you need the presence of others, like gently shifting relief-figures on the plinth of your own throne. (Benjamin 1999a, 86)

For Benjamin, intoxication was never an end in itself. Rather, what interested him was experience; indeed, his entire philosophy can be seen—much like Kant’s for that matter—as a theory of the conditions of experience. Unlike Kant, however, Benjamin considered these conditions of experience to be profoundly historical. In his view the nineteenth century had witnessed a sudden transition from a structure of experience based on tradition and practice to one that was isolated and shock-like, from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*. The world became disenchanted, our experience alienated. Remnants of older forms of experience are still to be found in aesthetic experiences, such as Baudelaire’s poetic expressions of what he calls *correspondances*,<sup>2</sup> or Marcel Proust’s recollection of childhood experiences after eating the *madeleine* cake. These are well-known examples; but what they signify for Benjamin is precisely a relation of interdependence and reciprocity between world and man, between subject and object; what Benjamin called *mimesis* and what more recently the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa called *Resonanz* (Rosa 2016). In our modern society, however, the world has become silent. Throughout his oeuvre, Benjamin mentions several explanations for this, from the emergence of a scientific-rational worldview (what Horkheimer and Adorno later called instrumental reason) to the alienation caused by industrialization and urbanization.

Benjamin did not want to be nostalgic for an earlier time; rather the challenge was to ‘redeem’ and transform earlier modes of experience. For Benjamin, intoxication was the learning school for an alternative mode of experience, which in his essay on surrealism he called “profane illumination.”

But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson. (Benjamin 1999a, 209)

Or later:

the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking will teach us about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flaneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. (216)

What Benjamin is after in the essay on surrealism, and what he attempts with the notion of profane illumination, is no less than a *dialectics of intoxication*. He admires greatly the way the surrealists found intoxication in the profane—in old-fashioned or exotic objects, in everyday cityscapes, in word-play—he admired their radical understanding of freedom, as not merely political but also spiritual, mental and sexual liberation, and he fully condoned their attempt “to win the energies of

intoxication for the revolution” (Benjamin 1999a, 2015). Still, eventually they did not succeed in this, and in Benjamin’s view, their failure had two reasons. First, in his view the surrealists remained in a dream-world, while the actual goal was, in his view, to wake up. On the *Arcades Project* he writes:

Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. (Benjamin 1999b, 458)

Again, for Benjamin intoxication is no end in itself, but rather a learning school for a different mode of experience which is thoroughly materialist, not a return to the higher realms of the mind but rather, the reverse, a return to materiality, to the physical body, and a farewell of the abstractions of the mind.

Moreover, Benjamin’s problem with the surrealist dream, as well as with synthetic intoxication, is that it remains a thoroughly *individual* experience, just like the *correspondances* of Baudelaire, or the childhood recollection of Proust. They may be remnants of an earlier mode, but on the individual level. Indeed, if the point is to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” we have to think of experience in a collective way.

### 3. The intoxicating crowd

This brings us to the next question, concerning the political implications of the dialectic of intoxication. Up until now I have not discussed one crucial source of intoxication, which is the collective. In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin writes how the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of the modern metropolis, and therewith of the big city masses. He quotes the famous poem *À une passante* in which the poet catches a glimpse of a woman, falls in love, only to lose sight of her immediately because they get pushed into opposite directions by the crowd: he calls this ‘love at last sight’, as the poet realizes that the chances of a second encounter in the metropolis are close to zero. Benjamin writes: “The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for people who have been abandoned” (Benjamin 2003, 31).

Considering the opposition between critique and intoxication that we started with, one can understand how the crowd can be seen as a narcotic or opiate, and indeed has been considered as such in a dominant strand of social psychology and philosophy. From the perspective of the critical individual, a mass can be a grey, anonymous, and dangerous entity, threatening his very existence, by either destroying him or, as The Borg in Star Trek used to say, assimilating him. Thinkers who reflected on the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism were rightfully suspicious of mass movements. Indeed, as Theodor W. Adorno writes in his essay ‘Critique’, “whoever criticizes violates the taboo of unity” (Adorno 2005, 283). On the other hand, everyone who has ever been in a crowd knows that being part of it can also be joyous, exhilarating, unexpected, stimulating; from the perspective of the crowd the critical individual can also be considered a passive bystander. Moreover, as Fredric Jameson has argued, the “‘Enlightenment’-



type critiques and 'demystification' of belief and committed ideology" has served to clear the ground for capitalism's "unobstructed planning and 'development'" (Jameson 2007, 43).

In order to get out of this deadlock we require a different conception of masses, collectives, or communities. In his book *Common Ground* (2014), Jeremy Gilbert discusses the 'Leviathan Logic' that has been dominant in the modern understanding of collectives, which runs from Hobbes onwards, and later can be found in writings of several conservative thinkers, such as Gustave LeBon and Ortega Y Gasset. According to Gilbert, this Leviathan logic is characterized by the following four assumptions:

- 1) an ontological individualism, i.e. the "implicit belief that social relations are not constitutive of the person and their most fundamental forms of experience" (Gilbert 2014, 31–32).
- 2) a negative understanding of the social as limiting or constraining the freedom of the individual
- 3) a vertical understanding of the group, namely as constituted by singular relationships of each individual member with the (real or metaphorical) leader
- 4) a meta-individualist conception of collectives, which has the properties of and acts like an individual (as illustrated by the famous frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan*)

Taken together, these assumptions lead to a conception of the collective as a mere aggregation of individuals, while at the same time considering it as essentially hostile to the individual's autonomy. For Gilbert, this logic prevails in contemporary neoliberalism, which takes the individual as "the basic unit of human experience" (Gilbert 2014, 38). It is even strategically deployed when neoliberal politics considers the individual's creativity as the main source of production, and individual responsibility as the legitimization for cutbacks and austerity. Interestingly, however, Gilbert argues that the same Leviathan Logic is in fact present in the left tradition as well, although it is of course valued in an entirely different way, such that the power of the group over the singular individual is indeed legitimized for the higher good. Soviet Communism too, considered the crowd as homogenous and with one will, represented by the party, and this logic still pervades in contemporary left-wing notions of populism of Laclau and Mouffe, where individuals gather under the 'empty signifier' that is 'the people' (Gilbert 2014, 57).

According to Gilbert, the main contemporary political challenge is to conceive of a different understanding of collectives, neither as disorganized rabble nor as totalitarian meta-individual, but rather "as a condition of dynamic multiplicity and complex creativity" (Gilbert 2014, x). This he finds in the concept of the Spinozean 'multitude', which has of course been further elaborated by Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. The multitude, in this understanding is:

a creative collectivity capable of exercising political agency; but [which] is neither composed of individuals nor itself constitutes a meta-individual. It is rather a potentially infinite network of singularities. (98)

The concept of the multitude—also in the work of Hardt and Negri—remains quite vague. It poses, most of all, a challenge, to think of the collective and the individual not as opposing and mutually



excluding forces, but rather to think in terms of a productive and fruitful interrelationship between the two. And, coming back to the issue of intoxication, can we think of a collective that is both powerful and productive, and at the same time critical, self-critical and open for dissenting voices. In other words: what would a 'critical mass' look like?

#### 4. Towards a critical mass?

I want to emphasize that this is not a merely academic issue, but a social and political one. We are living in an era of mass movements and mass protests. Only during the last months, we've witnessed numerous climate marches, women's marches, worker's protests, and uprisings in Chile, Lebanon and Hong Kong. These are movements emerging from the assembly and aggregation of critical individuals, and they in turn raise awareness and a critical attitude amongst the rest of the population. At the same time, we hear critique of such protests: that they are disorganized, uninformed, misdirected, hysterical or irrational. And this is not only critique coming from right-wing or conservative commentators; think of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' critique of 'folk politics', their term for the bad and unproductive romanticization of immediate and direct action at the expense of long-term strategy, the critical study of new ideas, and 'the long march through the institutions' (Srnicek and Williams 2015).

Indeed, we should not step into the pitfall of romanticizing the mass *per se*. Next to all the protests just mentioned, and next to Occupy, Extinction Rebellion and Arab Springs, we have in recent years also witnessed white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, and Polish far-right nationalists, or collectives more difficult to position on either side of the political spectrum such as the yellow vests. Which again raises the question that, if we take the crowd as a form of intoxication, how should we think of its relation to critique, and to critical consciousness? Can we think of a critical intoxication, or an intoxicated critique?

For a hint of an answer, let us turn to Benjamin one last time. In the essay on surrealism, Benjamin concludes in the following way:

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology [*Technik*] can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto. (Benjamin 1999a, 217–218)

This is a rather enigmatic passage, so we should try to unpack it. Profane illumination, Benjamin says, creates an *image space*, which, if it comes together with the *body space* of the collective, can lead to the revolutionary discharge. What that means, in my view, is that the collective or mass can only become a proper *mass movement* at the moment that it recognizes itself as a collective. In other words: the mass always needs to *perform* itself, and this performance cannot be spontaneous but must be consciously prepared, indeed is a matter of 'technique' (*Technik*). The

'image space', is, in other words, the result of a critical strategy. This calls to mind Friedrich Engels' concept of 'class consciousness' (*Klassenbewusstsein*), though what Benjamin has in mind seems to be slightly different, or at least an addition to this concept; not merely a discursive practice, but also an aesthetic and bodily practice. Indeed, *Technik* here cannot simply be translated as 'technology', as the translators have it; the German word, at least in the way Benjamin uses it, also refers to artistic, or rather aesthetic techniques (Lijster 2017, 92). Referring back to some of the earlier mentioned examples, we can think of the yellow vests, or the umbrellas of the protesters in Hong Kong, or the 'pussy hats' of the participants in the Women's March. Indeed, the very gathering of bodies in the streets, turning into a collective body moving through the streets, already contributes to the self-recognition and thereby empowering of the collective.

However, this self-identification should never be total, if the mass is still to remain critical. Otherwise, we risk relapsing in traditional notions of 'the people' or 'the community', governed by the Leviathan Logic that Gilbert was talking about.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, what we here call 'critical mass' is precisely characterized by the possibility of self-criticism, dissensus, and the potential of transformation. In fact, as Benjamin also noted, the main characteristic of fascism is precisely that it creates a *merely* aesthetic image of the 'people', without changing anything in the relations of production.

For our question concerning a critical intoxication or intoxicated critique, this entails a double movement, wherein our understanding of both critique and intoxication are expanded and adjusted. The notion of critique discussed in the first part, as detached and distanced, needs to be rethought, namely as embodied and contextualized. Following Donna Haraway and other feminist scholars, we should think of critique as emerging from 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988). Indeed, critical and rational consciousness has long pretended to be a kind of view from nowhere, but as Haraway remarks, "knowledge from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational" (Haraway 1988, 587). Critique, then, is always situated, but this does not mean that it necessarily resigns itself to this situation. Michel Foucault famously defined critique as "the art of not being governed like that" that is not "in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them" (Foucault 2007, 44). The 'like that' in this phrase is crucial, for it excludes from the outset the very possibility of not being governed *at all*, and therefore radically situates and historicizes critique. For Foucault, critique is not something that was invented by philosophers in the eighteenth century, and does come out of nowhere, but is an *attitude* that exists and has existed everywhere and every time that people revolted against certain (historical and situated) modes of governmentality. Interestingly, Foucault mentions mysticism as one of the earliest forms of this revolt (namely against the authority of the church) in the West, which brings his understanding of critique in close proximity to Benjamin's 'profane illumination': both mobilize the power of *experience* against the rules of law and dogma. And like Benjamin, Foucault underlines the supra-individual side to critique; he talks about critique as "both an individual *and collective* attitude" with the ultimate aim to "get out of one's minority" (Foucault 2007, 67, emphasis mine).

So how does one 'get out of one's minority'? To answer that question, we should again consider critique in its relation to the collective. A good point of departure could be Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'common sense', which he defines as "the diffuse, uncoordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment" (Gramsci 1971, 330). While Marx argued that the ideological 'superstructure' emerges naturally from the class that ruled over the means of production, for Gramsci it was less one-dimensional than that. Common sense, for Gramsci, is rather an arena of continuously contested and contesting ideas about what the world is like, and what is considered possible, necessary, realistic, etcetera. Ideological rule does not follow automatically from economic rule, but is rather the outcome of a struggle in which the ruling classes eventually gain hegemony over the definition of reality. Thus, for Gramsci it will not suffice for the suppressed classes to cease the economic means of production; the struggle to create a different hegemonic order, that is to define what is 'common sense', is also fought through cultural, educational and media institutions. Each political struggle, then, has to start with challenging and altering common sense. The way to do this, Gramsci argues, is not to start from scratch, but rather exists in "making 'critical' an already existing activity" (Gramsci 1971, 331). This implies that one starts from values and beliefs already acknowledged by a collective (such as 'freedom', 'equality' or even 'the common' itself), only to slightly shift them into a different direction. Following Gramsci, Christian Höller thus talked about 'uncommon sense', and considered the task of critique twofold: "to acknowledge the un-common element in the common, and to start building a new common on the basis of such un-common elements" (Höller 2015, 107).

On the level of strategy, Gramsci urges his reader:

To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce élites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset. (Gramsci 1971, 340)

Aside from the problematic metaphor, Gramsci's reference to 'elites' may seem to conflict with our concerns here. But although he suggests that "the culmination of this process can be a great individual philosopher" (Ibid.), we should keep in mind that in his view *all people* are potentially and principally philosophers and/or intellectuals, so that this process could indeed result in what I've called a *critical mass*.

Out of the preceding paragraphs an image emerges of a double dialectic, of intoxication and of critique. The first is the dialectic of intoxication we already discussed on the basis of Benjamin's critique of surrealism and his concept of profane illumination: a form of intoxication infused with a collective, and indeed critical element. Conversely, the second dialectic of critique entails the idea that critique should be 'situated', that is embodied, and if you will 'intoxicated', by the crowd, which however cannot mean that it puts itself entirely in the service of it. After all, that would be precisely the unjustified romanticizing of the 'wisdom of crowds', while the very purpose of critique is to acknowledge the uncommon in 'common sense', and to build further on it.

So finally, what would it mean for critique to be intoxicated, or itself be intoxicating. To start with the first, I believe the ‘outsider’-perspective or position of the critic is indeed unattainable today, if it ever was possible in the first place. Still, one might think of this position as an as-if position, again as a *performance*: although we know there’s no outside view, we might still act as if there is one. In that regard, one might compare philosophical critique with the famous artwork by Pierro Manzoni, of the pedestal of the world: not only does Manzoni make the entire world a ready-made artwork, but he also acts as if his pedestal is the only thing *not* belonging to that world (since a pedestal traditionally was not part of the artwork) (Lijster 2016). Only by imagining such a place beyond the world, such an imaginative place, one could start thinking of a different world, and indeed argue that in fact there are alternatives. This seems to contrast with the idea of working with and through the common sense; but what I have in mind is not some otherworldly utopia, but rather the simple act of imagining the world different than it is—moving from TINA (There Is No Alternative) to TAMARA (There Are Many And Real Alternatives). This is precisely what the hegemonic struggle over the creation a new ‘common sense’ is all about, and this struggle, as Gramsci already argued, does not and cannot only take place on the streets, but should also take place in schools, universities, media, and institutions.



Figure 1. Piero Manzoni, *Socle du Monde* (1961). HEART, Herring Museum of Contemporary Art.  
 Photograph: Ole Bagger

On the other hand, this new common sense can only be built by questioning the current common sense. Thus understood, critique can indeed be seen as a ‘toxin’ injected in the body of the common, leading to an altered state of mind of the collective. This then, might precisely be what an intoxicated and intoxicating critique might look like: intoxicated by the collective and common will for change, critique needs to take a stance, to position, commit and engage itself. Thus, by starting to build a new common sense and by inventing new futures, it can intoxicate future generations with the belief that another world is possible.

## 5. Postscript on Acid Communism

Undoubtedly, the most damaging and dangerous toxic in our contemporary world is capitalism itself, which is harming and killing people across the globe, poisoning our minds, and is destroying the very planet we are living on. Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek notes, “the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment” (Žižek 2009, 92). In this situation, critique is a vital antidote, which is to be injected into the common sense. Or perhaps we should, following Bernard Stiegler, consider it as a *pharmakon*, namely something that can be both a remedy and a toxin (Stiegler 2013). After all, critique can also have an unforeseen negative effect, as was for instance argued by Boltanski and Chiapello who showed how the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ emerged from a co-optation of the ‘artistic critiques’ of the 1960s (demanding more autonomy, flexibility and authenticity) at the expense of ‘social critique’ (revolving around equality and redistribution) (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). This is precisely what the dialectics of critique and intoxication described above entails: that both critique and intoxication have a subversive *and* a conformist potential. The point and the challenge is to bring them together in such a way that the subversive potential is fully actualized.

In the final texts written before his untimely death, cultural critic Mark Fisher coined the term Acid Communism. Inspired by the ‘psychedelic socialism’ of his friend Jeremy Gilbert, and returning to the countercultural utopian politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the adjective ‘acid’ obviously refers to psychedelic drugs. However, Fisher’s point was not to romanticize the hippie-generation:

The concept of acid communism is a provocation and a promise. It is a joke of sorts, but one with very serious purpose. It points to something that, at one point seemed inevitable, but which now appears impossible: the convergence of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising and psychedelic consciousness, the fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life. (Fisher 2018, 757–758)

Indeed, this promise of Acid Communism is one that has been forgotten, ignored or suppressed ever since. While the hippies themselves turned their backs on society in the course of the 1970s (‘socialism in one person’, as film maker Adam Curtis once waspishly called it), left politics turned into ‘third way’ social-democracy, which meant a shaking of ideological feathers and a capitulation to a neoliberal worldview. It led to what Fisher in one of his other seminal texts called ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher 2009), the belief that there is no reasonable alternative to the neoliberal capitalist organization of society.

Acid Communism was Fisher’s (unfortunately unfinished and thus not fully worked out) answer to capitalist realism. What would it mean to take serious once again the promises of the 1960s? Obviously, this would entail a head-on attack on neoliberalism. But clearly, acid communism is not merely directed at capitalism, but equally so at the several factions within the left, which today tend to either take in a conservative stance of romanticizing a pre-war or 1950s welfare state model (thereby neglecting the privileging of certain groups within that model) or one-sidedly focuses on

the cultural battle of suppressed minorities. The 'acid' in Acid Communism emphasizes that, in order to change things, it will neither suffice to redistribute the planet's resources in a more equal way, nor to grant equal rights within the existing economic system. An entirely different way of living, and hence of thinking, will be necessary, to depart from the individualist consumer model and the dictatorship of productivity that feed of our desires and wreaks havoc on earth.

This is where the subversive sides of critique and intoxication meet. Both of them denaturalize the world: critique by placing us at a distance from the present one, intoxication by immersing us in a different world. Both critique and intoxication point the individual beyond itself, towards something other or larger than itself. This is highly necessary in a world order that primarily addresses us as individuals, either as individual desiring consumers, or responsible and productive laborers. The dialectic of critique and intoxication is thus a first conceptual step towards a further alignment of consciousness-raising in both the spiritual and the social-political sense. Together, they can show, as Gilbert writes, "that the liberation of human consciousness from the norms of capitalist society is a desirable, achievable and pleasurable objective" (Gilbert 2017).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I want to express my gratitude to the editorial board of *Performance Philosophy* and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Such as in the poem with the same name: "Nature is a temple in which living pillars / Sometimes give voice to confused words; / Man passes there through forests of symbols / Which look at him with understanding eyes."

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert (2014) makes the useful distinction between 'community' and 'common'. While the first is "dependent upon a shared, but static and homogeneous identity, and that it is often evoked in order to neutralise any possible criticism of the power relations obtaining *within* 'communities'" (164), the latter "can be understood as that domain of creative potential which is constituted by, and constitutive of, sociality as such" (167). He continues: "In fact we might suggest that the common emerges precisely at the point where the preindividual becomes the transindividual, where the potentiality inherent in the sociality of social relations becomes the real creative potential of those relations as they are enacted and actualised in the present" (167).

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